



**Heinemann**

**Ancient and Medieval History**

Robert Darlington

# Greece

**Spartan Society to 371 BC**

 **Heinemann**  
Harcourt Education

## Spartan society and political power

### Chapter focus

At a time unknown but which most modern scholars judge to be soon after the Messenian rebellion of c.650 BC, Sparta made sweeping changes to its political and social system. According to ancient Greek writers, these changes were the work of one man and they came about very swiftly. This too is uncertain. What is clear is that Sparta's institutions had been similar to those of most other Greek poleis. Then Sparta adopted a political and social system unlike any other in the Greek world. According to the ancient sources, it was a system in which almost every aspect of life was subordinated to the single goal of military might.

In this chapter you will examine the origins of this system. You will also study evidence about Spartan government, the class divisions of Spartan society, the ways in which the Spartans controlled those they oppressed, the strange and brutal education system that produced Spartan citizens and the unique role of Spartan women.

### Focus questions

- 1 Who was Lycurgus?
- 2 How was Sparta's political and social system changed after c.650 BC?
- 3 Why did the Spartans adopt such a system?
- 4 How did the Spartans control the oppressed majority in their state?
- 5 What was the *agoge*?
- 6 Did Spartan women have more power and freedom than other women in ancient Greece?

### Important dates

<b>c.735–715 BC</b>	Spartan conquest of Messenia
<b>712 BC</b>	Partheniai sent to found Taras, Sparta's only colony
<b>c.650 BC</b>	Spartans crush Messenian revolt and introduce changes that will transform Sparta into a military state
<b>c.560–550 BC</b>	War of Sparta with Tegea
<b>c.550 BC</b>	Spartan conquest of Thyreatis
<b>480 BC</b>	Battle of Thermopylae
<b>464 BC</b>	Earthquake at Sparta
<b>463 BC</b>	Revolt of Messenian helots
<b>c.459 BC</b>	Capture of Mt. Ithome. Messenians settled at Naupactus

### Terms/Concepts

■ <i>agoge</i> page 31	■ <i>neodamodeis</i> page 25
■ <i>basileis</i> page 19	■ <i>obai</i> page 21
■ conjugal page 27	■ <i>partheniai</i> page 25
■ <i>ekklesia</i> page 19	■ patriarchal page 16
■ ephor page 17	■ <i>phylai</i> page 21
■ ephorate page 19	■ polytheistic page 16
■ <i>eunomia</i> page 21	■ regime page 27
■ <i>gerontes</i> page 19	■ servile labour page 16
■ <i>gerousia</i> page 19	■ sacred grove page 24
■ Great Rhetra page 17	■ Sibyl page 18
■ <i>homoioi</i> page 25	■ Spartan mirage page 16
■ <i>hypomeiones</i> page 25	■ Spartiates page 25
■ <i>krypteia</i> page 30	■ <i>syssition</i> page 30
■ liberality page 16	■ totalitarian page 27
■ martial valour page 16	■ <i>tresantes</i> page 25
■ <i>mothakes</i> page 25	

### Beginning the inquiry

As you work through this chapter, make notes that assist you in answering each of the focus questions. Note the number and author details of any source referred to in your notes.



# A unique society?

For much of the period from the mid sixth century to the fourth century BC, Sparta was the greatest military power in the Greek world. Around the middle of the sixth century, Sparta waged war against Tegea in southern Arcadia. The Spartans were defeated in their first campaign but in a second campaign they defeated Tegea and forced it to become a dependent state. About the same time, Sparta defeated the Argives and took the territory of Thyreatis from Argos.

In land area, Sparta was the largest of the hundreds of Greek poleis. It controlled over three times as much territory as Athens, its main rival, although Athens had a larger population. However, territorial size was not the reason for Sparta's power. Although it shared many of the values, ideas and beliefs of Greeks in other poleis, Sparta was different. Spartans took pride in the fact that they were the opposite of the intellectual, creative Athenians. Spartans, and other Greeks, had no difficulty in recognising what made Sparta different and so powerful—its total dedication to the goal of military invincibility.

Sparta was highly regarded by many other ancient Greeks, especially those who were opposed to the kinds of democratic changes that took place in fifth-century BC Athens. But it was not simply Sparta's opposition to democracy that was admired in ancient times and in much more recent eras. The simplicity and discipline of Spartan life had the approval of American and French revolutionaries in the eighteenth century. In the twentieth century, the German Nazis admired Spartan regimentation and glorification of war. Even today, 'Spartan' remains an adjective

to describe a person with qualities the Spartans claimed—discipline, toughness, simplicity and endurance. But how accurate is this image? Historians use the term '**Spartan mirage**' for the distorted image of Sparta created by its ancient Greek admirers. This term was first used by F. Ollier in 1933 to challenge the traditional image of Sparta that has come from ancient writers, particularly Xenophon, Plato and Plutarch. What was the true nature of Spartan society?

## Source 2.2

To be sure, the Spartans shared many basic institutions with other Greeks: their society was **patriarchal** and **polytheistic**, **servile labour** played a key role, and agriculture formed the basis of the economy. As elsewhere in Greece, law was revered and **martial valour** prized. Nonetheless, Sparta was unique in many important ways. No other Greek state ever defined its goals as clearly as Sparta or expended so much effort in trying to attain them. While the intrusion of the state into the lives of individuals was substantial in all Greek states, no state surpassed Sparta in the invasive role it played in the daily lives of its citizens. Spartans took an enormous pride in their polis, and other Greeks were impressed by the rigorous patriotism and selflessness the Spartan system entailed. The Spartans' extreme denial of individuality fostered a powerful sense of belonging that the other Greeks envied...

Sarah B. Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, p. 131.

## Source 2.1

Account of the funeral oration of the Athenian statesman, Pericles, for the Athenian war dead in the first year of the Peloponnesian War.

... we differ from our antagonists. We throw open our city to the world, and never by alien acts exclude foreigners from any opportunity of learning or observing, although the eyes of an enemy may occasionally profit by our **liberality**, trusting less in system and policy than to the native spirit of our citizens; while in education, where our rivals from their very cradles by a painful discipline seek after manliness, at Athens we live exactly as we please and yet are just as ready to encounter every legitimate danger.

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book II, 39.

**liberality** quality of being open-minded or unprejudiced

**Spartan mirage** distorted image of Sparta created by ancient Greek writers

**patriarchal** term used to describe a society ruled by fathers

**polytheistic** belief in many gods

**servile labour** slave workforce

**martial valour** military heroism

## Critical inquiry

### Refer to Sources 2.1–2.2.

- 1 In Source 2.1, Thucydides has Pericles of Athens describing some ways in which, in his view, Athenians were the opposite of their Spartan enemies. Basing your answer on this source, describe three ways in which you would expect the Spartans to be different from the Athenians. Justify your answer.
- 2 How useful and reliable would Source 2.1 be as evidence of the different attitudes of Spartans and Athenians?
- 3 According to Source 2.2, how were the Spartans:
  - a similar to other Greeks
  - b different from other Greeks?

## Lycurgus the law-giver: man or myth?

By the seventh century BC, many Greek poleis chose men to make written records of the laws of their states. Those so chosen were called 'law-givers', although it is not clear whether they created new laws or set down laws that were already in use. Lycurgus (or Lykourgos) was the legendary law-giver of Sparta, although Sparta's laws were not written down.

Modern historians differ on whether or not Lycurgus ever really lived but the ancient Greek historians followed the Spartan tradition, which held that the 'Great Rhetra', the set of laws dictating the entire Spartan political system, was brought to Sparta by Lycurgus. They differ on when Lycurgus lived. They also give different accounts of how he came to set down these laws. Xenophon claimed that Lycurgus wrote the laws then asked the Delphic oracle to approve them. Plato implied that the laws came from the oracle and that Lycurgus brought them to Sparta. Plutarch believed that Lycurgus modelled the laws on what he observed in Crete. However these laws really came about, evidence suggests that they were probably introduced after 650 BC.

**Great Rhetra** set of unwritten laws supposedly brought to Sparta by Lycurgus; also known simply as the Rhetra

### Source 2.3

How the change to good government came about I will now relate. Lycurgus, a distinguished Spartan, visited the Delphic oracle, and no sooner had he entered the shrine than he was greeted with these words:

*Hither to my rich temple have you come, Lycurgus,  
Dear to Zeus and to all gods that dwell in Olympus.  
I know not whether to declare you human or divine—  
Yet I incline to believe, Lycurgus, that you are a god.*

There is a story that the Priestess also revealed to him the system of government which obtains at Sparta to-day, but the Lacedaemonians themselves say that Lycurgus brought it from Crete after he became guardian of his nephew Leobotas, king of Sparta, and acted as his regent; for it is a fact that as soon as he received this appointment he made fundamental changes in the laws, and took good care that the new ones should not be broken. Later he reorganized the army, introducing the system of messes and the new tactical divisions of squadrons and companies, in addition to the new civil offices of **Ephor** and Elder. By these changes Spartan government was put upon a sound basis, and when Lycurgus died a temple was built in his honour, and he is still regarded with profound reverence.

Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book I, 66.

**ephor** a chief magistrate of Sparta



Source 2.4



The sanctuary at Delphi.

Source 2.5

There is so much uncertainty in the accounts which historians have left us of Lycurgus, the lawgiver of Sparta, that scarcely anything is asserted by one of them which is not called into question or contradicted by the rest. Their sentiments are quite different as to the family he came of, the voyages he undertook, the place and manner of his death, but most of all when they speak of the laws he made and the commonwealth which he founded. They cannot, by any means, be brought to an agreement as to the very age in which he lived ... But that he was of great antiquity may be gathered from a passage in Xenophon, where he makes him contemporary with the Heraclidae. By descent, indeed, the very last kings of Sparta were Heraclidae too; but he seems in that place to speak of the first and more immediate successors of Hercules ...

**Sibyl** priestess of the Delphic oracle

Sous certainly was the most renowned of all his ancestors, under whose conduct the Spartans made slaves of the Helots, and added to their dominions, by conquest, a good part of Arcadia.

Plutarch, *Lives: Lycurgus*, trans. John Dryden,  
The Internet Classics Archive.

## FYI

### The Delphic oracle

The ancient Greeks believed that the gods spoke to them through oracles. An oracle was a message from the gods at a place through which people could make requests of the gods. The most important oracle was at Delphi, which, according to a myth, was the navel of the world. The Greeks built a sanctuary at Delphi to which they came from all over the Greek world to consult the gods. The advice of the Delphic oracle was sought on forms of government, laws, wars and many other matters. Consultation was done through the Sibyl, whose answers were translated by the priests of Apollo, the sun-god and god of law. Answers were usually vague enough to be interpreted in several ways.



## Critical inquiry

### Refer to Sources 2.3–2.5.

- 1 Outline the two versions offered by Herodotus to explain how Lycurgus came to set down the Great Rhetra, the laws that changed Spartan government and society.
- 2 Summarise the main point about Lycurgus made by Plutarch in Source 2.5.
- 3 Explain why Lycurgus, if he really existed, might have wanted Spartans to believe that the new laws came from the Delphic oracle.

## Political power

The Spartan constitution was supposedly based on the Great Rhetra. Under this constitution there were four institutions of government. They were the **ekklesia** (Assembly), the **gerousia**, the **ephorate** and the kingship. This was a very different system from that which existed in other Greek poleis where systems of government changed from Mycenaean kingdoms, through Greek Dark Age chiefdoms, to aristocratic oligarchies (occasionally displaced by tyrants), and, by the fifth century—in some instances—to democracies.

**ekklesia** the Spartan Assembly of all male citizens over the age of thirty; sometimes incorrectly referred to in the past as the *apella*

**gerousia** the Spartan Council of **gerontes** (elders)

**ephorate** the five ephors, chosen each year by the **ekklesia** (Sparta's chief magistrates)

## The dual kingship

Two hereditary kings shared power at the top of Sparta's system of government. One had to come from the Agiad family, the other from the Eurypontid family. Under this dual kingship, neither king could take a course of action without the consent of the other. At first, the two kings appear to have had wide powers as judges, chief priests and military leaders. When a Spartan king led the army to war outside Laconia, he had full power to command and to negotiate. However, he could be put on trial on his return to Sparta if his actions at war were considered to betray Sparta's interests.

Modern scholars have offered several explanations for this unique system. They include theories:

- that dual kingship was designed to prevent any king from gaining too much power
- that it was a compromise between two powerful families or between the **basileis** of two or more villages when they united to form the city of Sparta.

At the beginning of the fifth century BC, Sparta passed a law requiring one king to remain in charge at Sparta whenever the other king led the army to war. This avoided divided leadership in battle, maintained royal authority at home and ensured that Sparta always had at least one king in the period between the other king's death and his replacement by his heir.

The powers of Sparta's kings were reduced over time. Each month the kings were required to swear an oath to the ephors that they would keep the law. By the fifth century BC, several judicial powers had been taken over by the ephors and *gerousia*. By this time the kings also lost some powers in war and in managing Sparta's relations with other states. The decline of royal power has been attributed to rivalries between joint-kings and several cases in which kings were punished for conspiring with Sparta's enemies.

**basileis** petty kings or chiefs

### Source 2.6

The prerogatives of the Spartan kings are these: two priesthoods, of Zeus Lacedaemon and of Zeus Uranius, and the power of declaring war on whom they please. In this, no Spartan may attempt to oppose their decision, under pain of outlawry. On service, the kings go first and return last; they have a bodyguard of a hundred picked men and are allowed for their own use as many cattle as they wish. To them personally are allotted the skins and chins of all animals offered for sacrifice. In peace-time their privileges are as follows: at all public religious celebrations they are the first to sit down at the dinner which follows the sacrifice; they are served first, each getting twice as much of every dish as anybody else. Theirs is the right to make the first ceremonial libation ... On the first and seventh days of every month each king is given a full-grown animal to offer in sacrifice in the temple of Apollo, also a bushel of barley-meal and a Laconian quart of wine.

At all public games seats of honour are reserved for them. It is their duty to select and appoint the officials who see to the entertainment of foreign visitors, and each of them nominates two 'Pythians'—officials, that is, whose duty it is to visit Delphi when occasion arises, and who take their meals with the kings at the public expense ...

They are responsible for the safe-keeping of all oracles (the 'Pythians' also have knowledge of them), and certain definite legal matters are left to their sole decision. These are as follows: first, if a girl inherits her father's estate and has not been betrothed by him to anybody, the kings decide who has the right to marry her; secondly, all matters connected with the public roads are in their hands, and, thirdly, anyone who wishes to adopt a child must do it in the king's presence.

They sit with the twenty-eight Elders in the Council chamber, and in the event of their absence from a meeting, those of the Elders who are nearest of kin to them take over their privilege and cast two votes, in addition to their own.

Herodotus, Book VI, 52–7.

Source 2.7



Statue of hoplitodromus (running hoplite). The statue is known as Leonidas, the name of the Spartan king who led the Spartan three hundred who fought to the death at Thermopylae to delay the Persian invasion in 480 BC.

## The *gerousia*

The council of *gerontes* (elders), or *gerousia*, wielded much power in the Spartan political system. It was composed of the two kings and twenty-eight men who had reached sixty years of age, the age at which Spartans no longer had to perform military service. Under Spartan law, all male citizens of that age or older could be elected to the *gerousia*, but evidence suggests that it was mainly composed of wealthy men. Although laws and other major decisions were voted on in the more democratic *ekklesia*, they had to originate in the *gerousia*.

Election to the *gerousia* was the highest honour for a Spartan. Candidates were chosen according to who received the loudest shouts of approval when their names were put to the *ekklesia*. *Gerosia* members then served for life. They formed a predominantly aristocratic council with wide powers including the right to judge serious criminal cases. In this institution Sparta had something in common with the oligarchies that ruled several other Greek states.

## The *ekklesia* (Assembly)

All male citizens over the age of thirty could attend meetings of the *ekklesia*, or Assembly, which normally met once a month, outdoors at full moon. However, male citizens were a very small proportion of the total population of Laconia and even they had very limited powers. The Assembly could vote by shouting on public policy decisions, elect candidates to fill places in the *gerousia*, elect ephors and other magistrates, appoint generals and admirals, grant or take away Spartan citizenship, and pass or reject laws proposed by the *gerousia*. However, the Assembly had no power to initiate changes to laws and it is generally believed that it was not allowed to debate, but simply to vote for or against proposals sent down by the *gerousia*. Historians disagree on the issue of how democratic the *ekklesia* really was.

## The ephorate

The role of the ephors ('overseers') is not mentioned in the Great Rhetra, so it is possible, as Plutarch claimed in his *Lives: Lycurgus*, that the ephorate was established at a later time to act as a further check on the powers of the kings. Each year five ephors were chosen by the *ekklesia*. They were chief magistrates and they appear to have gained more power than the



kings. Each month they swore an oath that they would uphold the powers of the kings so long as the kings acted lawfully. They had the power to demand of the kings explanations of their conduct and to arrest them if they broke the law. During wars, two ephors accompanied the king with the army.

Ephors also had wide police powers, especially in suppressing the helots. They dealt with foreign ambassadors, deciding whether or not their requests would be sent to the *gerousia* and *ekklesia*. They had the power to call meetings of the *ekklesia* and to attend all meetings of the *gerousia*. In war, they decided how many age-groups were called up to fight and when the army was sent to battle. Effectively, the ephors had authority over all other officers and institutions of the Spartan state. However, once his year of office was completed, an ephor could not be re-elected.

#### Source 2.8

Leaving here aside all the disputes about the exact meaning of particular clauses of the Rhetra, we can summarise its essence as follows. First, it prescribed the establishment of a new cult (Syllanian Zeus and Athena), the arrangement of the members of the community into structural units (*phylai* and *obai*), the establishment of the *gerousia* of 30 members, including the kings, and the regular holding of assemblies. And second, it prescribed the correct procedure to be followed in the assemblies, leaving the right of the final decision to the people. According to Aristotle, the kings Polydoros and Theopompos added later the so-called Rider to the Rhetra. It gave the *gerontes* and the kings the right to dissolve the assembly if the people would speak crookedly.

Aristotle quoted also six lines of Tyrtaios [Tyrtaeus]. They referred to an oracle, brought from Delphi by unspecified persons, which stated that the political initiative must belong to the kings, then must follow the *gerontes*, and thereafter the people who must respond with straight decisions ...

These lines probably derive from the poem called "Eunomia" by the later authors. They reflect quite closely the prescriptions in the second half of the Rhetra and may be regarded even as Rhetra's paraphrase. According to Aristotle they referred particularly to the fact of the addition of the Rider.

Mait Koiv, 'The Origins, Development and Reliability of the Ancient Spartan Tradition about the Formation of the Spartan Constitution', *Studia Humaniora Tartuensia*, No. 1.3 (2000).

#### FYI

Unlike other Greek poleis, Sparta had hereditary kings until the end of the third century BC.

According to Xenophon, ephors had the power to fine anyone they chose and to exact payment on the spot. They also had power to dismiss other magistrates and bring them to trial on capital charges. On the beginning of their term in office, ephors decreed that all citizens must 'shave their top lips and obey the law'.

Out of the five ephors elected each year, the name of one ephor was used at Sparta to signify the year.

*phylai* tribes

*obai* villages

*eunomia* Spartan term for good order

#### Source 2.9

Meanwhile the Lacedaemonians, upon their return from Argos after concluding the four months' truce, vehemently blamed Agis for not having subdued Argos, after an opportunity such as they thought they had never had before, for it was no easy matter to bring so many and so good allies together. But when the news arrived of the capture of Orchomenos, they became more angry than ever, and, departing from all precedent, in the heat of the moment had almost decided to raze his house, and to fine him ten thousand drachmae. Agis however entreated them to do none of these things, promising to atone for his fault by good service in the field, failing which they might then do to him whatever they pleased; and they accordingly abstained from razing his house or fining him as they had threatened to do, and now made a law, hitherto unknown at Lacedaemon, attaching to him ten Spartans as counsellors, without whose consent he should have no power to lead an army out of the city.

Thucydides, Book V, 63.



Source 2.10

... anarchy and confusion long prevailed in Sparta, causing, moreover, the death of the father of Lycurgus. For as he was endeavouring to quell a riot, he was stabbed with a butcher's knife, and left the title of king to his eldest son, Polydectes ...

Amongst the many changes and alterations which Lycurgus made, the first and of greatest importance was the establishment of the senate [*gerousia*], which having a power equal to the king's in matters of great consequence, and, as Plato expresses it, allaying and qualifying the fiery genius of the royal office, gave steadiness and safety to the commonwealth. For the state, which before had no firm basis to stand upon, but leaned one while towards an absolute monarchy, when the kings had the upper hand, and another while towards a pure democracy, when the people had the better, found in this establishment of the senate a central weight, like ballast in a ship, which always kept things in a just equilibrium; the twenty-eight always adhering to the kings so far as to resist democracy, and on the other hand, supporting the people against the establishment of absolute monarchy ...

The people then being thus assembled in the open air, it was not allowed to any one of their order to give his advice, but only either to ratify or reject what should be propounded to them by the king or senate. But because it fell out afterwards that the people, by adding or omitting words, distorted and perverted the sense of propositions, Kings Polydorus and Theopompus inserted into the Rhetra, or grand covenant, the following clause [the Rider]: "That if the people decide crookedly it should be lawful for the elders and leaders to dissolve," that is to say, refuse ratification and dismiss the people as depravers and perverters of their counsel ...

Plutarch, *Lycurgus*.

Source 2.11

Another defect in the Lacedaemonian constitution is seen in connection with the office of ephor. The ephorate independently controls much important business. Its five members are chosen from among all the people, with the result that very often men who are not at all well-off find themselves holding this

office, and their lack of means makes them open to bribery ... And just because the power of the ephors is excessive and dictatorial, even the Spartan kings have been forced to curry favor with them. And this has caused further damage to the constitution; what was supposed to be an aristocracy had become more like a democracy. In itself the ephorate is not a bad thing; it certainly keeps the constitution together; the people like it because it gives them a share in an office of power ... But while it was necessary to select ephors from among all the citizens, the present method of selection strikes me as childish. The ephors have powers of jurisdiction also, and decide cases of importance; but considering that anybody at all may hold the office, it would be better that they should not have power to give verdicts on their own, but only to decide in accordance with stated rules and regulations. Nor does the way in which ephors live conform to the aims of the constitution. They live a life of ease, while the rest have a very high standard of strictness in living, so high indeed that they really cannot live up to it but secretly get round the law and enjoy the more sensual pleasures.

Aristotle, *Politics*, Book II, 9.

## FYI

Compared with other Greek poleis, Sparta was relatively free of conflict between groups of its citizens. Civil wars were frequent within many other poleis and they were often conflicts between those who wanted oligarchies and those who wanted democracy. They were also often caused by conflicts between different oligarchic factions. By the fourth century BC, many Greek thinkers believed that a balanced constitution could produce stability and prevent such civil strife. Some came to believe that Sparta's constitution represented such a balance. They saw Sparta's kings representing monarchy, the *gerousia* representing aristocracy and the *ekklesia* providing a democratic element.

# Structure of the Spartan government

## THE TWO KINGS

- one from the Agiad family
- one from the Eurypontid family
- had some judicial powers
- chief priests of Sparta
- military leaders
- some powers in foreign policy (powers were reduced over time)

## THE GEROUSIA (28 members aged over 60, plus the 2 kings)

- elected for life by the *ekklesia*
- in theory this office was open to all male citizens aged 60 or over BUT probably mainly composed of aristocrats
- chosen by the *ekklesia*
- wide judicial powers
- proposed laws that were put to the *ekklesia*

## FIVE EPHORS

- elected by the *ekklesia*
- supervised kings when at war
- acted as chief magistrates
- had powers in foreign policy
- presided over *ekklesia* meetings
- swore an oath each month to uphold powers of kings (if the kings acted lawfully)
- attended *gerousia* meetings
- could not be re-elected after one year (powers were increased over time)

## THE EKKLESIA (ASSEMBLY)

- all male citizens over 30 years of age could attend meetings
- could vote by shouting but were probably not allowed to debate, so could only pass or reject laws proposed by the *gerousia*
- elected ephors, *gerousia* (when vacancies occurred)
- appointed generals and admirals
- could grant or take away citizenship

The structure of Spartan government.



## FYI

### Sparta's strangest king?

Among the best known of Sparta's kings was Kleomenes (or Cleomenes) I. The following account is based on that of W. G. Forrest (see 'Modern sources' on page 36), which is based on Herodotus.

Kleomenes' reign began c.520 BC, causing a quarrel within the Agiad family arising from the fact that Kleomenes was the first son of king Anaxandridas' second wife. (The ephors had forced Anaxandridas to marry a second wife when, after fifteen years, she had not produced an heir. Significantly, this second wife came from the family of Chilon, an ephor.) However, no sooner was Kleomenes born than Anaxandridas' first wife gave birth to a son, followed soon after by twin sons.

Consequently, Kleomenes' father did not want him. Instead, the future king was brought up under the influence of Chilon the ephor's family, and some historians have seen in Kleomenes' subsequent rise to power a struggle between the kings and the ephors.

When king Anaxandridas died, Kleomenes, as the first born, succeeded to the throne. However, Dorieus, the eldest son of the king's first wife, had expected to be king, so Kleomenes and the ephors forced him to leave Sparta.

In 508–507 BC, Kleomenes and the other Spartan king Demaratos led a Peloponnesian invasion of Attica, the wider territory controlled by Athens. However, the two kings quarrelled and the expedition collapsed. This quarrel never really ended.

In c.494 BC, Kleomenes' army defeated the Argive army and then massacred the survivors who had taken refuge in the **sacred grove** of Argos. When Kleomenes returned to Sparta, he was put on trial by the ephors for not having followed up his victory with an attack on the city of Argos.

Kleomenes was acquitted but soon after he had Demaratos deposed on the grounds that he was not a legitimate king. Kleomenes had bribed Delphi before the Spartans consulted the oracle on this matter.

When the truth of the bribery emerged, Kleomenes fled from Sparta and tried to organise Arcadian cities against Sparta. When Kleomenes was invited to return to Sparta, he was so completely mad that he was restrained in chains. According to Herodotus, this did not stop him from committing suicide by self-mutilation. The Spartans said his madness was caused

by drinking undiluted wine. Other Greeks said Kleomenes went mad because he committed sacrilege by burning the sacred grove.

## Critical inquiry

### Refer to Sources 2.6–2.12.

- 1 Using Herodotus (Source 2.6) as evidence, list and describe the prerogatives and responsibilities of the Spartan kings.
- 2 Source 2.7 has often (wrongly) been called a statue of the Spartan king Leonidas. What role of Spartan kings might have led to such an assumption?
- 3 Study Source 2.8.
  - a What were the essential points of the Rhetra?
  - b What was the Rider to the Rhetra?
- 4 According to Thucydides in Source 2.9:
  - a How did the Spartan citizens treat king Agis for his failure to defeat Argos?
  - b What does this source suggest about the limits of the powers of Spartan kings?
- 5 According to Plutarch in Source 2.10:
  - a What was the political situation in Sparta before Lycurgus changed the laws?
  - b Why was the establishment of the 'senate' [the *gerousia*] 'the first and of the greatest importance' of the changes made by Lycurgus?
- 6 As Plutarch was a critic of democracy and was writing many centuries after the events he described, how useful and reliable would you expect his account to be?
- 7 Compare Source 2.10 with Source 2.8. To what extent do they agree on the purpose of the Rider and the reasons it was added to the Rhetra?
- 8 List Aristotle's criticisms of the ephorate in Source 2.11.
- 9 Could Aristotle be biased? Support your answer with quotes from Source 2.11.
- 10 Using Source 2.6 and Sources 2.8 to 2.12, describe how the powers of the ephors, *gerousia* and *ekklesia* limited those of Sparta's kings.

**sacred grove** wooded area, usually around a temple or religious site

# Social structure

## Spartiates

**Spartiates** were male Spartan citizens. They called themselves *homoioi*. They were the ruling elite of Sparta but they claimed social equality between themselves. In line with this ideal, Spartiates dressed like one another, ate the same food in communal messes and were restricted in the kinds of houses they could build. Despite such measures, inequality existed among Spartiates and increased during the fifth century BC. A Spartiate had to be the son of a Spartiate. He had to have been brought up in the Spartan education system and had to contribute food from his estate to the communal mess. All Spartiates were banned from taking part in trade, as they were full-time soldiers.

*homoioi* peers, similars or equals

## Perioeci (or Perioikoi)

The *perioeci* (outlanders, neighbours or 'those who dwelt around Sparta') were free but they did not have the rights of Spartan citizens. They lived in their own, largely self-governing, communities but they had to obey Spartan laws and fight for Sparta when required.

## Helots

When the Spartans took control of the entire Laconian plain during the eighth century BC, they reduced much of its population to the status of helots, slaves of the Spartan state. When Sparta conquered Messenia around 715 BC and crushed the Messenian rebellion around 650 BC, most Messenians also became helots. Unlike slaves in other Greek poleis, the helots were not owned by individuals and could not be sold. They lived on the land of the *homoioi* families and were required to provide those families with much of their farming produce. The helots were not allowed to leave the land to which they were bound. They were, however, required to act as servants to Spartiates in times of war and were often required to fight for Sparta as light infantry, especially in later years.

Under Spartan law, the helots were enemies of the state and were often treated brutally. They were required to wear humiliating clothes and were given an annual beating to remind them that they were slaves. However, the Messenian helots never lost their desire for freedom. Following a devastating earthquake in 464 BC, the Messenians again revolted. After years of fighting, they surrendered their

stronghold at Mt. Ithome to the Spartans in c.459 BC. Many of the former Messenian helots were allowed to depart and the Athenians settled them at Naupactus, on the Corinthian Gulf.

## 'Inferiors'

Within Laconia there were, at various times, groups who were neither *perioeci* nor helots but still were not Spartan citizens. They included *partheniai*, the children of unmarried Spartans. In 712 BC, *partheniai* were sent to found Sparta's only colony, Taras, probably because they formed a discontented element in Sparta. *Mothakes* were another 'inferior' group. As non-Spartan boys who were adopted as playmates for Spartan boys, they went through the harsh Spartan education system but did not normally gain full citizenship. Helots who had been freed for serving Sparta in battle were called *neodamodeis*. Although free, they were not citizens. Increasingly a further class of 'inferiors' called *hypomeiones* emerged. These included *tresantes*, or 'tremblers', who had failed to show sufficient courage, and other Spartiates who were stripped of their citizenship because they had become so impoverished that they were no longer able to contribute to the communal mess.

Source 2.13



A Spartiate.



#### Source 2.14

We are all aware that there is no state in the world in which greater obedience is shown to the magistrates, and to the laws themselves, than Sparta ... In Sparta ... the stronger a man is the more readily does he bow before the constituted authority ...

The following too may well excite our admiration for Lyscurus ... [He] induced the whole state of Sparta to prefer an honourable death to an ignoble life ...

In Sparta he [Lyscurus] enforced, as a matter of public duty, the practice of virtue by every citizen. And so it is that ... this city of Sparta, with good reason, outshines all others in virtue ...

Provided they [obeyed] the law, the city belonged to them, each and all ... and on an equal footing.

Xenophon, *Polity of the Lacedaemonians*, VII–X, trans. H. Dakyns, Project Gutenberg Etext.

#### Source 2.15

Describes the way the Spartans treated helots who had fought for Sparta against Athens in 424 BC.

The Helots were invited by a proclamation to pick out those of their number who claimed to have most distinguished themselves against the enemy, in order that they might receive their freedom; the object being to test them, as it was thought that the first to claim their freedom would be the most high-spirited and the most apt to rebel. As many as two thousand were selected accordingly, who crowned themselves and went around the temples, rejoicing in their new freedom. The Spartans, however, soon afterwards did away with them, and no one ever knew how each one of them perished.

Thucydides, Book IV, 80.

## FYI

### Slavery in ancient Greece

In all Greek poleis the leisure of the ruling classes was provided by the labour of slaves. Their conditions varied between different poleis and within any polis. Generally they had few rights or no rights at all. In most cases, people became slaves by being captured in war, bought in slave markets or born in slavery. They worked in agriculture, industries, public work, state mines and private households. In some cases, as in Sparta, slaves were even required to fight for the state. Slavery was never discussed as a moral issue in Greece until the late fifth century BC.

## Instruments of control

Most histories of Sparta identify a fundamental truth that is central to understanding the Spartan social and political system. The oppression and exploitation of the helots made the Spartan militaristic way of life possible and that way of life was an essential consequence of Sparta's need to control the helots. Throughout the period when Sparta controlled Messenia, helots outnumbered *homoioi* by about twenty to one. Most historians regard this as the reason why Spartiates had to be highly trained, full-time soldiers, always ready to suppress any helot rebellion.

#### Source 2.16

The Second Messenian War [known also as the Messenian rebellion of c.650 BC] had been a terrifying revelation of the potential risks of the helot system, and the possibility of a repetition haunted the imaginations of Spartans and their enemies. One certain way of avoiding such a catastrophe, abandoning Messenia, was unthinkable. Consequently, the Spartans were forced to find another way to preserve their domination over their helots and the prosperity it brought. The solution they found was drastic, and its implementation gradually transformed Sparta and eventually created the unique regimented society known to us from the Classical sources. Simply stated, the Spartans realized that if all potential hoplites could be mobilized and trained to the highest degree of skill possible, Sparta would enjoy an overwhelming military advantage over its helots and other enemies. Therefore the Spartans reformed their institutions with a view toward achieving two goals: freeing male citizens of the five villages that constituted the polis of Sparta from all but military obligations, and socializing them to accept the extraordinary regimentation and discipline required of a Spartan soldier. Until the fourth century and the Hellenistic period, the Spartans were the only real professional soldiers. In effect they waged a perpetual war against the helots and were consequently always prepared to engage in other acts of aggression when necessary ...

The Spartan **regime** may be called **totalitarian**, for it touched on almost every aspect of life, including those we in modern western society consider private: how to wear our hair, the choice of whether and when to marry, the conditions of **conjugal** intercourse, and the decision whether to rear a child.

Pomeroy et al., pp. 137–9.

**regime** prevailing system of government and authority

**totalitarian** political system involving total control

**conjugal** of marriage

Source 2.17



A Laconian cup depicting two soldiers carrying a slain comrade on their shoulders, sixth century BC.

### Critical inquiry

Refer to Sources 2.13–2.17.

- 1 According to Xenophon in Source 2.14, what were the values and obligations of the Spartans?
- 2 In Source 2.15, how did the Spartans decide which helots they would kill?
- 3 In 464 BC there was a great helot revolt. Form a hypothesis to explain the motives for what is described in Source 2.15.
- 4 Explain and evaluate the different perspectives of Xenophon and Thucydides on Spartan values.
- 5 In the view of Pomeroy (Source 2.16), why did the Spartans reform their institutions to create a 'unique regimented society' and why could the Spartan regime be called totalitarian?
- 6 Discuss the usefulness and reliability of Sources 2.13 and 2.17 as evidence of values of the Spartans as a military elite.



## The military

It is impossible to know exactly when the Spartans came to organise as a military state. It seems most likely that the process began following the Second Messenian War, which ended around 650 BC. According to ancient Greek tradition, it took the Spartans twenty difficult years to suppress the Messenian rebellion. Whether or not Lycurgus really created the Spartan military system, evidence suggests that it was in place by the end of the seventh century BC.

Training for the Spartan military began at the age of seven and continued until the age of sixty, for those who lived that long. As all food and other necessities were provided by the helots, Spartiates had no obligations other than military service. In other Greek poleis, citizens were obliged to serve in the militia but, unlike the Spartans, these men were not full-time soldiers. Most of these citizen soldiers had farms to run or other occupations to follow. Therefore, it was not surprising that the Spartans came to be considered the most professional and formidable hoplites in the Greek world.

### FYI

#### Hoplite warfare in ancient Greece

Hoplites were the heavy infantry of the ancient Greek world. Their equipment weighed about half the weight of an average man. They had to supply all of their own weapons and armour and in most Greek poleis only the middle classes and the rich could afford these. Hoplites also needed to be in occupations where they could spare time for regular training. Poorer citizens, the majority, did not serve as hoplites but as light infantry or skirmishers.

Every hoplite had a hoplon (round wooden shield), a bronze helmet, bronze cuirass (breastplate) to protect the upper body, *spolas* (thick leather strips that hung like a skirt) to protect the groin and upper legs, and greaves (bronze shin pads).

By the seventh century BC, hoplites fought in phalanxes. In these formations, soldiers were packed together in rows. A phalanx was commonly eight rows deep. Long spears were used to thrust overhand at the enemy. Like a rugby scrum, the ranks behind pushed those in front to break the enemy ranks. Short swords were used for close fighting. Front-row soldiers who were wounded or killed were replaced by those in the next row. Normally, once a phalanx collapsed, its members dropped their heavy shields and fled the battlefield.

### Source 2.18

After the Lacedaemonians had heard the complaints of the allies against the Athenians, and the observations of the latter, they made all withdraw, and consulted by themselves on the question before them. The opinions of the majority all led to the same conclusion, the Athenians were open aggressors, and war must be declared at once. But Archidamus, the Lacedaemonian king, came forward, who had the reputation of being at once a wise and a moderate man, and made the following speech:

'I have not lived so long, Lacedaemonians, without having had the experience of many wars, and I see those among you of the same age as myself, who will not fall into the common misfortune of longing for war from inexperience or from a belief in its advantage and its safety. This, the war on which you are now debating, would be one of the greatest magnitude, on a sober consideration of the matter. In a struggle with Peloponnesians and neighbours our strength is of the same character, and it is possible to move swiftly on the different points. But a struggle with a people who live in a distant land, who have also an extraordinary familiarity with the sea, and who are in the highest state of preparation in every other department; with wealth private and public, with ships, and horses, and heavy infantry, and a population such as no one other Hellenic place can equal, and lastly a number of tributary allies—what can justify us in rashly beginning such a struggle?' ...

The Lacedaemonians voted that the treaty had been broken, and that war must be declared ...

Thucydides, Book I, 79–8.



Source 2.19



Two groups of hoplites fighting in phalanx formation. From a Corinthian vase, c.640 BC.

### Changes in the Spartan military

The Spartiates, who fought as hoplites, were always the dominant force in the Spartan military. As the army had to be able to suppress helot rebellions, Spartan leaders were often reluctant to have the hoplites deployed far from home. *Perioeci* and helots under Spartan command were also increasingly used in Sparta's wars with other states. These forces were used as light infantry and as skirmishers. Sparta also recruited mercenaries from other Greek states during the Peloponnesian War.

Source 2.20

[A]s the Spartiate aristocracy declined in numbers, the proportion of *perioikoi* in the army increased ... One can only suppose that they were taken for a time away from their normal occupations and trained under Spartan leadership ... The role of cavalry ... was not large ... Archers were employed, often Cretan specialists hired for the purpose ... There were also slingers and other light troops ...

The other main source was the helots. The 700 whom Brasidas took with him to the north [in 425 BC during the Peloponnesian War] were still formally slaves; they were only liberated on their return home, when they were settled in a town which Sparta had recently taken over from the Eleans ... About the same time, by what must have been a formal decision of the state, Sparta created a whole new class, called



*neodomodeis* (literally 'new citizens') though it is quite certain that they received nothing like citizen rights). These were helots who were already liberated at the time when they were enrolled. For the next fifty years, they were a very important part in Sparta's military effort. Some 3,000 of them were sent to Asia Minor in the course of the 390s ... The training-up of such numbers from a notoriously oppressed and ill-treated class looks like an appalling risk, though no doubt, in case of trouble, the Spartans could count on the *perioikoi* to support them.

Antony Andrewes, *Greek Society*, Penguin, London, 1991, pp. 165–6, 176.

## Syssitia

Spartan soldiers ate and drank in a common mess called a **syssition** (or *syssutian*). According to the ancient sources, the *syssitia* (plural) (or *syssutia*) usually consisted of about fifteen Spartiates. The system was designed to reinforce group loyalty and co-operation. Each member of the group had to provide a regular quantity of food and drink from his estate. The *syssitia* were also used to emphasise Spartan superiority and helot inferiority. Self-control was a Spartan virtue and, like most Greeks, Spartans drank their wine diluted with water to avoid getting drunk. However, helots were brought in and forced to get drunk at the *syssitia*.

### Source 2.21

... the Spartans, like the rest of the Hellenes, used to mess privately at home ... [Lycurgus] was determined to drag his people out of holes and corners into the broad daylight, and so he invented the public mess-rooms ...

As to food, his ordinance allowed them only so much as ... should guard them from actual want. And, in fact, there are many exceptional dishes in the shape of game supplied from the hunting field ... So that ... till the mess breaks up, the common board is never stinted ... nor yet extravagantly furnished.

Xenophon, *Polity of the Lacedaemonians*, V.

### Source 2.22

The mess ought to be run at public expense, as in Crete. At Sparta every individual has to contribute, and as some of them are quite poor and unable to meet the heavy expenditure, the result is the opposite of what the legislator [Lycurgus] intended. For messing in common is intended to be a democratic practice, but under the rules such as those obtaining at Sparta it is anything but democratic. For it is not easy for those who cannot afford it to join in, yet this is their traditional way of determining citizenship—to exclude anyone who is unable to pay this particular due.

Aristotle, *Politics*, Book II, 9.

### Source 2.23

They used to make the Helots drunk and exhibit them to the young as a deterrent from excessive drinking.

Plutarch, 'The Ancient Customs of the Spartans', *Moralia*, III, 33.

## Krypteia

The **krypteia** was the secret police force of Sparta. It was run by the ephors, who recruited young men and sent them out for a year to spy on the helots. These young Spartans were authorised to kill helots, especially those who appeared to have the kinds of qualities that might fit them to lead a helot rebellion. Each year the ephors declared war on the helots so that such killings could be carried out.

### Source 2.24

The magistrates dispatched privately some of the ablest of the young men into the country, from time to time, armed only with their daggers ... [I]n the daytime, they hid themselves in out-of-the-way places ... but in the night issued out into the highways, and killed all the Helots they could light upon; sometimes they set upon them by day, as they were at work in the fields, and murdered them ... Aristotle, in particular, adds, that the ephori [ephors], so soon as they were entered into their office, used to declare war against them [the helots], so that they might be massacred without a breach of religion.

Plutarch, *Lycurgus*.

## Critical inquiry

### Refer to Source 2.18.

- 1 Why did the Spartan king Archidamus call for 'sober consideration' before going to war against Athens?
- 2 What unstated reason could Archidamus have had for wanting to avoid war in 'a distant land'?
- 3 What was the decision of the Spartans?
- 4 Explain why the account of Archidamus' speech might not be reliable.

### Refer to Source 2.19.

- 1 Look closely at Source 2.19. According to Thucydides (Book V, 70), the role of flute-players, at least in the Spartan army, was to keep the soldiers advancing steadily without breaking their order. Describe what you think would be the advantages and difficulties for hoplites of fighting in phalanx formation.
- 2 Form a hypothesis to explain why the Spartans would have had an advantage over other Greeks in phalanx fighting.

### Refer to Sources 2.20–2.24.

- 1 According to Source 2.20, as their own numbers declined, how did the Spartans maintain the strength of the army?
- 2 Why does Andrewes describe the military training of helots as 'an appalling risk'?
- 3 Compare and contrast the views of Xenophon and Aristotle on the *syssitia*.
- 4 Using Sources 2.21 to 2.24, explain how the *syssitia* and *krypteia* were used to oppress the helots and to reinforce Spartan group loyalty and the Spartan belief in their superiority over the helots.
- 5 Discuss the usefulness and reliability of Sources 2.21 to 2.24.

## The agoge

The Spartan ideal for a man was a tough warrior who could endure any pain or discomfort and who would die fighting rather than face the disgrace of retreat or surrender. The sole aim of the *agoge*, the Spartan education system for boys, was to produce such warriors. The *agoge* was run by the Spartan state, supervised by the ephors, and it exercised total control over boys between the ages of seven and twenty.

When a male child was born, officials examined it and decided whether it was fit to be raised or left to die through exposure near Mt. Taygetus. At the age of seven, boys were taken from their mothers to live in barracks. They were placed in groups called herds, where the aim was to instil obedience, endurance, conformity and group loyalty and to develop athletic skills and fighting skills. Poetry, singing and dancing were taught to instil patriotism but only the basics of reading and writing were taught. Boys were encouraged to speak little and speak plainly.

The herds were ruled by older youths who were expected to treat the younger boys brutally. As they proceeded through the age-groups of the *agoge*, the boys were conditioned by harsh physical training, hunger due to insufficient food, cold due to insufficient clothing and ordeals such as the annual whipping ceremony at the altar of Artemis Orthia. There, groups of youths would try to steal cheese off the altar, which was defended by older youths with whips. For long periods, boys had to hide in the countryside, living off what they could steal. If caught they were flogged.

Having survived this training, Spartans were admitted to the army at the age of twenty. From that age they were allowed to marry but they still had to eat in the common mess and sleep in army dormitories until the age of thirty.

### Source 2.25

I first came across Sparta in the Boy Scouts. Many of us did. One of the Scouts' laws says 'A scout smiles and whistles under all difficulties'. To explain what this means, we were told the story of the Spartan lad and the fox cub as an example of behaviour to which, as Boy Scouts, we could aspire—though it's a bit of an oddity as a moral tale.



The Spartan lad ... had stolen a fox cub and hidden it under his tunic when he was caught and brought before the magistrate on a charge. He steadily denied all knowledge of the crime and was put under severe cross-examination, protesting all the while his innocence. And then suddenly he fell down dead. The fox cub had bitten through his clothes and had been eating into his guts all the time the lad was smiling and keeping his cool and, for all we know, whistling. It was a fine example of fortitude and endurance ... our hero refused to speak the truth: an odd hero, when you think about it, for the Boy Scouts.

Peter France, *Greek as a Treat*, BBC Books, London, 1993, pp. 20–1.

the malperformance of a service. So they, the Lacedaemonians, visit penalties on the boy who is detected thieving as being but a sorry bungler in the art. So to steal as many cheeses as possible [off the shrine of Artemis Orthia] was a feat to be encouraged; but, at the same moment, others were enjoined to scourge the thief, which would point a moral not obscurely, that by pain endured for a brief season a man may earn the joyous reward of lasting glory. Herein, too, it is plainly shown that where speed is requisite the sluggard will win for himself much trouble and scant good.

Xenophon, *Polity of the Lacedaemonians*, II.

#### Source 2.26

... instead of leaving it to each member of the state privately to appoint a slave to be his son's tutor, he [Lycurgus] set over the young Spartans a public guardian ... with complete authority over them ... He had authority to hold musters of the boys, and as their overseer, in case of any misbehaviour, to chastise severely. The legislator further provided his pastor with a body of youths in the prime of life, and bearing whips, to inflict punishment when necessary, with this happy result that in Sparta modesty and obedience ever go hand in hand, nor is there lack of either ...

Instead of softening their feet with shoe or sandal, his rule was to make them hardy through going barefoot ...

Instead of making them effeminate with a variety of clothes, his rule was to habituate them to a single garment the whole year through, thinking that so they would be better prepared to withstand the variations of heat and cold.

Again, as regards food ... by ... training in boyhood they would be better able when occasion demanded to continue toiling on an empty stomach ...

On the other hand ... he did give them permission to steal this thing or that in the effort to alleviate their hunger ...

It is obvious, I say, that the whole of this education tended, and was intended, to make the boys craftier and more inventive in getting in supplies, whilst at the same time it cultivated their warlike instincts. An objector may retort: "But if he thought it so fine a feat to steal, why did he inflict all those blows on the unfortunate who was caught?" My answer is: for the self-same reason which induces people, in other matters which are taught, to punish

#### Source 2.27

... The young men slept together, according to division [*ile*] and company [*angele*], upon pallets which they themselves brought together by breaking off by hand, without any implement, the tops of reeds which grew on the banks of the Eurotus. In the winter they put beneath their pallets, and intermingled with them, the plant called *lykophron*, since the material is reputed to possess some warming qualities.

Plutarch, 'Ancient Customs of the Spartans', 6.

#### Source 2.28

Agesilaus, who in all probability was to be but a private man, was educated according to the usual discipline of the country, hard and severe, and meant to teach young men to obey their superiors. Whence it was that, men say, Simonides called Sparta "the tamer of men," because by early strictness of education they, more than any nation, trained the citizens to obedience to the laws, and made them tractable and patient of subjection, as horses that are broken in while colts. The law did not impose this harsh rule on the heirs apparent of the kingdom. But Agesilaus, whose good fortune it was to be born a younger brother, was consequently bred to all the arts of obedience, and so the better fitted for the government, when it fell to his share; hence it was that he proved the most popular-tempered of the Spartan kings, his early life having added to his natural kingly and commanding qualities the gentle and humane feeling of a citizen.

Plutarch, *Lives: Agesilaus*, trans. John Dryden.

## Critical inquiry

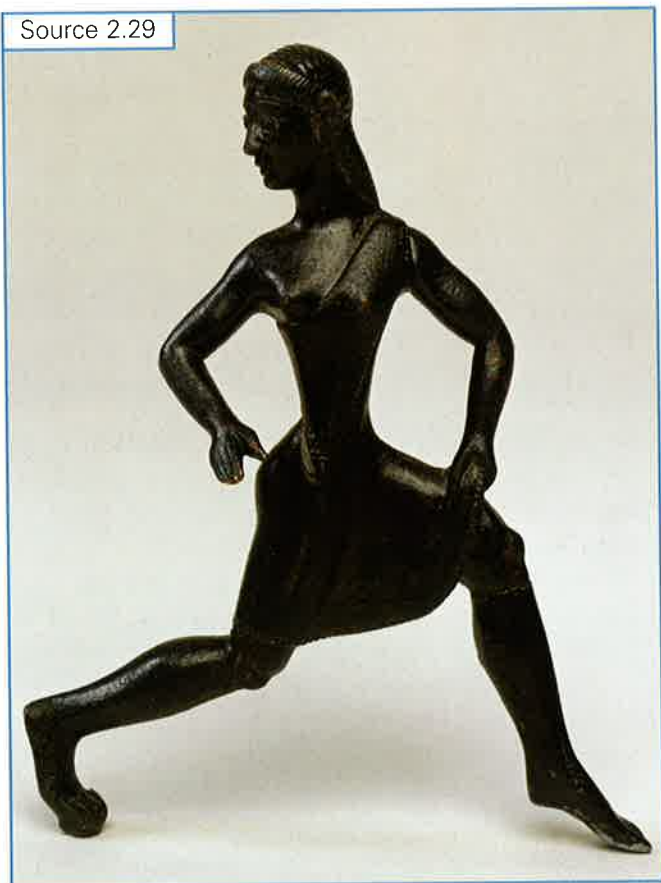
### Refer to Source 2.25.

- 1 The story of the Spartan boy and the fox cub (Source 2.25) was told much earlier by Plutarch in *Lycurgus*. Does this make it reliable? Give reasons for your answer.
- 2 Why would the Boy Scouts have used the story as a moral example?

### Refer to Sources 2.26–2.28.

- 1 According to Xenophon, how were young Spartans trained and what was the purpose of the *agoge*?
- 2 What additional information does Plutarch provide on the *agoge*?
- 3 Describe the tone of sources 2.26 to 2.28 and discuss the usefulness and reliability of these sources.

Source 2.29



Bronze figure of a girl running, c.520–500 bc. The girl is believed to be Spartan because of her garment and because Sparta had a strong tradition of girls taking part in athletics competitions. British Museum.

## Spartan women

In most poleis of the ancient Greek world, women had very low status. They were barred from public life and were restricted to domestic roles. In Athens, it was common for free women to send slaves to do the shopping, as it was considered improper for respectable women to be seen in public or even to be mentioned in public places. In this as in most aspects of life, Sparta, at least from the seventh century BC, was different.

## Recent research

In the first full-length historical study of Spartan women to be published (Pomeroy, 2002), Sarah B. Pomeroy shows that Spartan women were better fed and better educated than other Greek women. They were known for their beauty throughout ancient Greece, they trained with Spartan men, lived public lives and came to control much of the wealth of Sparta. Pomeroy also argues that Spartan women had a high level of control over their own fertility and played a significant role in maintaining the values of Spartan society.

## Education

The military ethos of Spartan society affected the roles and status of Spartan women as much as it determined the roles of the *homoioi*. Like the boys, Spartan girls were educated in age groups by the state. Their physical training included throwing the javelin and discus, as well as wrestling and running. While exercising they were sometimes naked, according to some ancient sources, but usually wore short tunics with slits up the sides to allow free movement. Their education probably included some reading and writing, as there is evidence that at least some Spartan women were literate. It included studies of poetry about Spartan customs and legends as well as singing and dancing. Although they learned weaving and other domestic skills, this was mainly intended to fit them to supervise such work rather than to carry it out. The key purpose of their education was to fit them to produce and raise Spartan soldiers.



Source 2.30

[Lycurgus] ordered the maidens to exercise themselves with wrestling, running, throwing the quoit, and casting the dart, to the end that the fruit they conceived might, in strong and healthy bodies, take firmer root and find better growth, and ... that they ... might be the more able to undergo the pains of child-bearing. And to ... take away their ... tenderness ... he ordered that the young women should go naked in the processions, as well as the young men, and dance, too, in that condition ...

Plutarch, *Lycurgus*.

Source 2.31

Throughout the rest of the world the young girl, who will one day become a mother ... is nurtured on the plainest food attainable ... whilst as to wine they train them either to total abstinence or to take it highly diluted with water ... And we, the rest of the Hellenes, are content that our girls should sit quietly and work wools ... But how are we to expect that women nurtured in this fashion should produce a splendid offspring?

Lycurgus pursued a different path ... believing that the highest function of a free woman was the bearing of children, in the first place he insisted on the training of the body as incumbent no less on the female than the male; and in pursuit of the same idea instituted rival contests in running and feats of strength for women as for men. His belief was that where both parents were strong their progeny would be found to be more vigorous.

Xenophon, *Polity of the Lacedaemonians*, I.

## Inheritance, land ownership and influence

How much power Spartan women really had is open to speculation. The ancient Greek writers on Sparta came from poleis where women had almost no power, and it is quite probable that they exaggerated the freedom they encountered in Sparta. It is likely, however, that Spartan women had wide powers in running their households because their husbands were frequently away on military duty. It appears that Spartan girls received as dowries half as much property as their brothers received as inheritance. As some male children were killed at birth and many men were killed in war, some women inherited all of the land owned by their parents.

If the sayings collected by Plutarch are to be believed, then Spartan women not only had more power than any other Greek women but they also played a powerful role in perpetuating Spartan military values.

Source 2.32

... nearly two-fifths of the whole country are held by women; this is owing to the number of heiresses and to the large dowries which are customary ...

Aristotle, *Politics*.

Source 2.33

Another Spartan woman killed her son, who had deserted his post because he was unworthy of Sparta. She declared: 'He was not my offspring ... for I did not bear one unworthy of Sparta.'

Another, hearing that her son had fallen at his post, said: 'Let the cowards be mourned, I, however, bury you without a tear, my son and Sparta's.'

As a woman was burying her son, a shabby old woman came up to her and said, 'You poor woman, what a misfortune!' 'No, by the two goddesses, what a good fortune,' she replied, 'because I bore him so that he might die for Sparta and that is what happened for me.'

Another woman handed her son his shield, and exhorted him: 'Son, either with this or on this.'

Plutarch, 'Sayings of Spartan Women', *Moralia*, III, 241.

## FYI

The Spartan woman about whom we know the most is Gorgo. She was the daughter of king Kleomenes and the wife of king Leonidas, who led the Spartans at Thermopylae. According to Herodotus, Kleomenes took advice on matters of state from Gorgo when she was just eight or nine years old.

The first woman to win victory in the Olympic Games was Cynisca, a Spartan princess. She was born c.440 BC, the daughter of the Spartan king Archidamus II. Women were not allowed to compete in the Olympic Games or even to attend them. They could, however, win victory as the owners of teams in the chariot races and that is what Cynisca did.

## Critical inquiry

### Refer to Source 2.29–2.31.

- 1 Describe ways in which, according to Xenophon (Source 2.31), the lives of Spartan women were different from those in the rest of Greece.
- 2 According to Xenophon, what was the Spartan motive for this difference?
- 3 To what extent could Sources 2.29 and 2.31 be used as supporting evidence for Plutarch's claims in Source 2.30?

### Refer to Sources 2.32–2.33.

- 1 According to Aristotle, what proportion of the land of Sparta was owned by women in his time?
- 2 What reasons does he give for this development?
- 3 What other factors could have contributed to this?
- 4 As Aristotle wrote in fourth century BC Athens, is it likely that he exaggerated the wealth of Spartan women? Give reasons for your answer.
- 5 Describe the attitudes and values expressed in the sayings that Plutarch attributed to Spartan women.
- 6 The historian W. G. Forrest has pointed out that by Plutarch's time, in the second century AD, Sparta was virtually a 'museum', a tourist attraction for wealthy Romans. Discuss the reliability of sayings recorded in such a context.

## Culminating the inquiry

- 1 Throughout this chapter you have gathered evidence from a range of sources and have written notes to assist you in answering each of the focus questions. Use those notes to write brief answers to questions 1 and 3 to 6.
- 2 Frame a hypothesis based on the notes you compiled to answer Focus Question 2: 'How was Sparta's political and social system changed after c.650 BC?'
- 3 Identify the sources you will use to support your argument. (Also, consider the reliability of these sources.)
- 4 Prepare your argument in writing or as an oral presentation.

## Review and revise

### Activities

The following activities will help you to revise and extend your knowledge of the Spartan political and social system after the changes made in the seventh century.

- 1 Quick quiz.
  - a What was the Great Rhetra?
  - b What did Spartans mean by 'eunomia'?
  - c Who were the *homoioi*?
  - d How were Spartan hoplites armed?
  - e What was a phalanx?
  - f Who ate and drank in a *syssition*?
  - g What was the aim of the *krypteia*?
  - h Why was the *ekklesia* prevented from discussing laws and policies?
- 2 Describe the powers of Spartan kings and the limits placed on those powers.
- 3 Draw a social pyramid or a mind map to represent the relative position in Spartan society of Spartiates, *perioeci*, 'inferiors' and helots.

### Working historically

- 1 Read the following source and explain why, in light of the education, training and ethos of Spartan soldiers, this Spartan surrender was so surprising.



### Source 2.34

This extract describes the surrender of a Lacedaemonian force including 120 Spartans at Sphacteria in the seventh year of the Peloponnesian War.

Proclamation was ... made, to know if they [the Spartans] would surrender themselves and their arms to the Athenians to be dealt with at their discretion.

The Lacedaemonians hearing this offer, most of them lowered their shields and waved their hands to show that they accepted it. Hostilities now ceased ... after consulting together they surrendered themselves and their arms ...

Nothing that happened in the war surprised the Hellenes so much as this. It was the opinion that no force or famine could make the Lacedaemonians give up their arms, but that they would fight on as they could, and die with them in their hands: indeed people could scarcely believe that those who had surrendered were of the same stuff as the fallen ...

Thucydides, Book IV, 38–40.

## 2 Test

- Name two changes to Spartan government established by the Great Rhetra.
- What was the ephorate?
- Describe the roles and powers of the *gerousia* and the *ekklesia*.
- Outline the ways in which Spartan women had greater rights and powers than women in the rest of Greece.
- With reference to Source 2.35 and other sources, explain the methods and aims of the *agoge*.

### Source 2.35

... as soon as they were seven years old they were to be enrolled in certain companies and classes, where they all lived under the same order and discipline ... Of these, he who showed the most conduct and courage was made captain; they had their eyes always upon him, obeyed his orders, and underwent patiently whatsoever punishment he inflicted ...

Plutarch, *Lycurgus*.

## Further explorations

### ■ Viewing

*The Spartans*, three-part documentary produced and directed by Tim Kirby for Channel Four television, UK (ABC Video).

### ■ Reading

#### Ancient sources

Aristotle, *Politics*.

Herodotus, *The Histories*.

Plutarch, *Lives: Agesilaus*.

Plutarch, *Lives: Lycurgus*.

Plutarch, *Moralia*, III, 'Sayings of Spartan Women'.

Plutarch, *Moralia*, III, 'The Ancient Customs of the Spartans'.

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

Xenophon, *Polity of the Lacedaemonians (Spartan Constitution)*.

#### Modern sources

Andrewes, A., *Greek Society*, Penguin, London, 1991.

Cartledge, P., ed., *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Ancient Greece*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

Cartledge, P., *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History 1300–362 BC*, Routledge, London, 2002.

Cartledge, P., *The Spartans: An Epic History*, Pan Macmillan, New York, 2003.

Forrest, W. C., *A History of Sparta*, Duckworth, London, 3rd edn, 1995.

Grant, M., *Greeks and Romans: A Social History*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1992.

Pomeroy, S. B. et al., *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999.

Pomeroy, S. B., *Spartan Women*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002.

Powell, A. and Hodkinson, S., *Sparta: Beyond the Mirage*, Classical Press of Wales, London, 2002.

Powell, A., *Athens and Sparta: Constructing Greek Political and Social History from 478 BC*, Taylor & Francis, London, 2nd edn, 2001.

## Web links

- Go to [hi.com.au/ancient](http://hi.com.au/ancient) to find websites to enable you to conduct research and present a report on the tactics and/or conduct and/or organisation of the Spartan military. You could refer to one or more campaigns of the Peloponnesian War or other conflicts.
- The [hi.com.au/ancient](http://hi.com.au/ancient) site also contains links to sites containing translations of the ancient sources listed above.

